

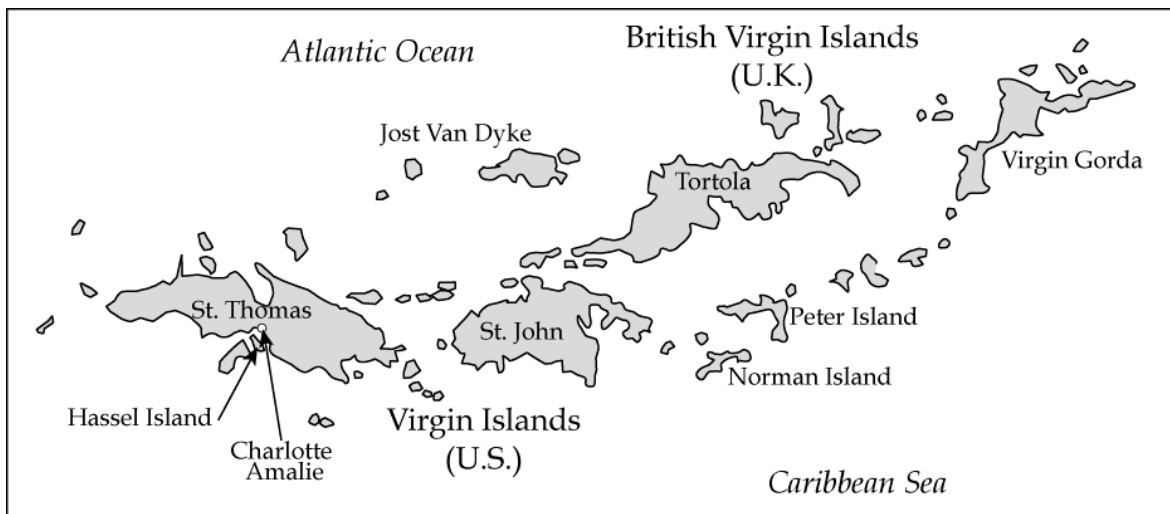
Report

Virgin Islands National Park

■ 1.0 Site Description

Virgin Islands National Park, initially founded in 1956, is composed of approximately three-fifths of the island of St. John and nearly all of Hassel Island in Charlotte Amalie Harbor on St. Thomas (see Figure 1). In 1962, the park was expanded by 5,600 underwater acres to protect coral reefs and other marine environments. The park is known for its scenic beauty, crystal clear blue-green waters and coral reefs. In addition to marine life, the Park has sandy white beaches and tropical forests that support over 800 species of plant life.

Figure 1. Virgin Islands (U.S.) and British Virgin Islands (U.K.)



In addition to natural resources, the park has historic relics from pre-Colombian Amerindian civilizations as well as remnants of Danish colonial sugar plantations, a reminder of the African slaves on the islands used as a workforce. These artifacts show a part of the rich history of the island.

Over the past ten years, annual visitation has averaged 943,000 visitors per year. For 2000, visitation is expected to reach 1.3 million. Approximately 30 percent of these visitors arrive by cruise ship, although this market share is growing. These visitors generally remain in the park for only a few hours on predetermined tours. The other 70 percent of the visitors generally arrive via car or island taxi and are on the island for more than a day. A new Visitor Contact Station has been built near the ferry dock at Cruz Bay.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

Virgin Islands Transportation (VITRAN) provides hourly public transit service within the park, but it does not serve most park sites and the North Shore Road, the most-used roadway on the island (see Figure 2). Moreover, VITRAN is suffering ongoing financial problems that make its scheduled service unreliable. The predominant mode of visitor transportation within the park is the jitney, essentially a pick-up truck with benches built into the rear bed capable of transporting 12 to 24 passengers. Commercial vessels (ranging in size from 6 to 130 passengers) also provide an alternative means to visit the park. Together, these modes help reduce the number of visitors driving the park's roadways.

Despite these forms of ATS, the private vehicle remains a common mode of transportation among park visitors. The number of private cars on St. John is growing, and now exceeds the number of island residents. The number of rental cars is growing, too, following recent legislative changes that allow cars rented on St. Thomas to be ferried over to St. John.

Bicycling within the park is difficult because the roadways are heavily traveled, steep, and narrow.

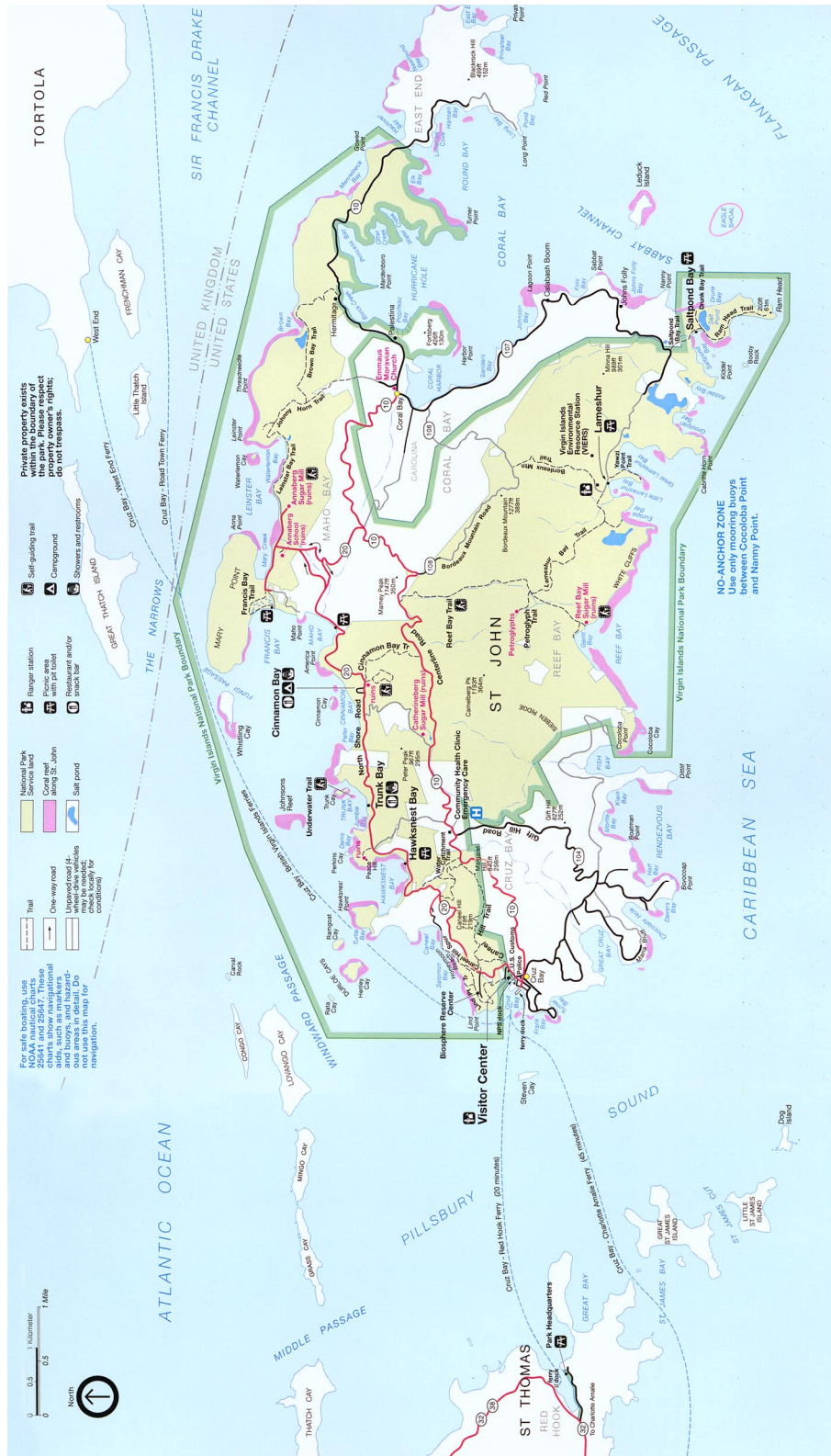
■ 3.0 ATS Needs

Park officials believe there is a “tremendous need” for additional ATS and for measures to regulate the flow of traffic on St. John. When visitors from cruise ships disembark on the island, the park facilities are quickly overloaded. Because the park roadways are very steep and narrow, heavy traffic is a safety concern. The danger is exacerbated by the presence of commercial vehicles on the roadways: trucks hauling water, construction materials, and heavy equipment, in addition to off-road construction vehicles such as backhoes and loaders. All must share the road with cars and jitneys because there is no alternative commercial vehicle access.

There is frequent congestion in the park, particularly on the North Shore Road. Turnouts and parking areas fill up quickly and parked cars spill out onto the roads themselves, adding to the congestion. Taxis and jitneys frequently stop in driving lanes to provide commentary and let visitors enjoy views. This blocks traffic and creates a dangerous situation, both for the passengers in the taxi/jitney and for the passengers of vehicles attempting to pass. Other dangerous passing situations occur when slow-moving commercial vehicles cause traffic tie-ups because of the lack of turnouts.

In 1999, some 23 motor vehicle accidents were reported within the park's boundaries, one a fatality. Slippery pavement, especially in curves, is a frequent contributor to accidents involving tourists who do not know how to drive the roads. The park's traffic problems will become more acute as the number of annual visitors to the park rises.

Figure 2. Virgin Islands Transportation



There is some community interest in building a bicycle and hiking trail from Cruz Bay to Trunk Bay, an important tourist destination about three miles to the northeast. A dedicated bicycle and pedestrian right-of-way would provide a safe alternative means of traveling between Cruz Bay and Trunk Bay that would avoid the North Shore Road. Given St. John's steep hills, however, the trail would induce only a small percentage of visitors to forgo motor vehicle transport entirely, and would thus have little impact on the island's overall traffic patterns.

Ultimately, a comprehensive transportation management plan is needed to address the park's congestion problems and to find ways of reducing the numbers of motor vehicles on the park's roadways.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

St. John's serious and worsening traffic problems make Virgin Islands National Park a near-term candidate for alternative transportation systems. ATS are urgently needed to improve safety, prevent damage to natural and cultural resources, and enhance the overall quality of the visitor experience.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

Virgin Islands National Park. Internet site: <http://www.nps.gov/viis/>. Information printed December 1999.

Virgin Islands National Park. Park brochure. Undated.

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Russell Berry, Superintendent, January 27, 2000 and February 7, 2000

John King, Superintendent, January 18, 2001